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Security Assistance Training Face to Face:

The Life of an IMSO

by

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As a group of international pilots from four continents looked on, I stood in front of the Alamo explaining the significance of the Texas battle for independence. One of the students asked what led to the fight. It wasn't long before we digressed into a discussion of the revolutionary war, taxation without representation, and reasons for the establishment of states. To some of the students the answers were well known. But many of them were getting information they never knew before. As their eyes lit up and the questions kept coming, a wave of satisfaction swept over me. Here I had a group of exceptionally bright, articulate, young aviators who will soon assume positions of leadership and influence in their countries, and I was allowed to hold center stage and tell them the story of the United States. Its part of the pleasure of being an International Military Student Officer or, as we have become known recently, an IMSO.

The work of an IMSO is not for everyone. If there is one quality the IMSO needs above all others, it is patience. I work in a small office, usually looking after the needs of ten to fifteen officers. When I first took the job I thought attending to the needs of such a small group of officers should present no problems. I quickly learned that would not be the case. You face many obstacles daily.

First there is the language barrier. Because you are working with individuals who obviously have intelligence, you might easily assume that what you are telling them will be understood. This can be quite dangerous. It is easy to cross wires, so efforts must constantly be made to check to see if what you wanted to say was understood. The best way to do this is to simply and honestly ask the international [student] if he would repeat the message, just to make sure. Handled with tact and with a sense of humor, the practice will be greatly appreciated.

Second is the cultural barrier. The way we think, the way we learn, and the attitudes we have about the world around us can differ greatly. Many of the students we teach are products of educational systems entirely segregated according to sex. Many of our students had their marriages arranged for them. A good number come from militaries that have little if any interaction between officers and enlisted men other than the following of orders. Some come from countries where only the privileged have electricity to serve them. A few come from countries where telephones are rare. It is not surprising, then, that the American world often proves to be confusing, if not down right bewildering.

Next there is the money barrier. The cost of daily living in the United States often comes as a shock to our guests. With the exception of a few countries, most of the trainees come to the United States with what we would view as limited resources. Although the U.S. does provide many students from IMET countries with a daily living allowance that covers necessities with a bit to spare, anyone hoping to live like an American of equivalent rank might quickly become disappointed. I could write a whole chapter on the discouraging used car deals in which our trainees have become involved, throwing good money after bad. Even though I make it a practice to brief our students on what is expected, I dread going in large groups to restaurants and having to explain tipping and taxation customs anew once the bill comes. And it is hard to explain why anyone would pay $15 to sit in the 85th row of the second deck at Memorial Stadium in Austin to watch a meaningless Southwest Conference football game between the University of Texas and

Texas Christian University. The fact that 75,000 people joined us only seems to verify that there are a lot of crazy people with more money than they know how to properly use.

There are other barriers too. Time is treated differently in many parts of the world. Agreed upon appointments are not met on time. Sometimes they are not met at all. Students express surprise when they discover this upsets their American colleagues. No harm was meant, they explain--something just came up. Once again, to avoid crossed communications, particularly concerning important appointments, an IMSO must emphasize the time requirement is firm. To confirm the schedule, I would once again politely suggest the student repeat the hour of the scheduled appointment.

Manners also vary. What might be good etiquette in one culture is seen to be in poor taste in another. What we've always tried to do is to remember to treat our students as we'd like to be treated if we were in their position. Hopefully our well- intentioned *faux pas* would be overlooked or tolerated. The idea is to help them avoid embarrassment if possible, and to accept in good faith that some activities that may offend us are not intentional.

So how do we build respect when we face so many obstacles? We do so by handling our jobs with professionalism. The knowledge and skills our students have gained in our academic classrooms earn enormous admiration. The tools they will carry with them from their classroom experience is obviously valuable and appreciated. More than two thirds of the time here, however, is spent outside of school. The IMSO's challenge is to make those off-duty hours comfortable and livable. Professionalism for the IMSO sometimes requires rethinking conventional ways of doing things. Professionalism for the IMSO is spending time speaking to a trainee--eye to eye--about family while "more important" business awaits. It means concentrating during casual conversation to understand what is being said. It means personally going to the airport, no matter what the time, to welcome an arriving student or to send off one departing. It means checking out requests and getting an answer as quickly as possible. It means doing a great deal of work which your supervisor will never see. But your trainee will notice. He will gain respect for you and the United States through your care.

The best way to build respect for the United States in the eyes of your trainees, though, is through the Department of Defense Information Program (DoD IP). The Information Program's guidelines are inspired. The objective is to expose students to life in the United States. When it comes to filling up those off-duty hours with substance, learning, and a real understanding of what makes an American "tick," the Information Program can't be beat. It is also a lot of fun, and helps make many happy memories for our trainees. I honestly believe the Information Program ranks a close second to the technical training our students receive.

In administering the Information Program the first and most important step is finding an American sponsor for the student. The American sponsor is someone who will look after the student, invite him home for dinner and conversation, and take him shopping. Because they, too, love to tell the story of America, they are the best way to show the student what life is like here.

Our American sponsors gain a great deal, too. They get to travel vicariously to exotic places. They also have the warm reward of knowing that, in their small way, they are contributing to world peace. If they are adventurous, they may also have the opportunity to sample many delicious new foods. Always, they will find surprising and satisfying ways to looking at the world and at themselves. Sponsors always seem to feel they get the best end of the bargain with the trainees they entertain.

Sponsors are only part of the Information Program. The bulk of the program lies in administering a schedule of activities to give the trainee a feel for how our system works. In a large metropolitan

area like San Antonio, meeting the program's 12 objectives is relatively simple. In smaller towns, greater distance may need to be traveled and more ingenuity may be required.

Even in a city like San Antonio, however, the best trips are often not the most obvious. One of the most successful stops for students at Randolph AFB, Texas, is visiting a small town city hall in the neighboring city of Schertz. Schertz borders Randolph AFB to the east and had always been a rural community until the last decade. During the last ten years the urban growth of San Antonio has spread into many communities like Schertz. Our visits are aimed at showing international trainees how small towns fit into the pattern of government in the United States. We wish to show how national, state, and local governments are divided, how city needs are financed, and how government works.

Arriving in Schertz, our students are met by the City Manager, the Chief of Police, the Fire Chief, and the director of the Emergency Medical Services. With the exception of the police department, all these agencies rely heavily on the assistance of volunteers. The city manager, asked his department heads to explain how they provided their services. Then he provided a short discussion of local history before explaining their public works and tax system. The staff then passed out key chains, city baseball caps, and pens, and we proceeded to visit the jail, sit in an ambulance, and visit the fire department. It was not only an excellent educational experience, but also a wonderful example of American hospitality for our students.

We have also been to the United States Federal Court building in downtown San Antonio to show our students the workings of our legal system. At the Court house we have seen a criminal trial in action, and the exhaustive steps taken to protect the rights of the innocent. We have also visited the U.S. Marshall's office, examined the probation system, and had a judge explain why certain cases come into his court and why others are heard at the state and local level. After a two-hour visit, I dare say many of our students know more about American law than the average America citizen.

I have always enjoyed taking our students to visit local high schools. Our educational system naturally piqued their curiosity. Walking through schools while classes are in session gives the trainees a change to see the "give-and-take" that is unique in America. It also allows our students a chance, on occasion, to e4ucate the American high schoolers. Often a question and answer period has come out of our walk throughs. On one visit, soon after the U.S. bombing of Libya in the Spring of 1986, a class "grilled" one of our Arab pilots and the results were invigorating for both our students and the high schoolers. Many prejudices were shed during that brief visit.

I also enjoy taking our students to one of our local television stations. We always visit the news room to see how the day's events are gathered and put into the half-hour format. The local broadcasters are always receptive to the visits and explain their jobs as we pass through. I remember once, as we were leaving, one of the students asking where the "government man sat." He could not believe my explanation that there are no government censors employed in television, radio, or in the newspapers in the United States. That gave me a chance to talk about our constitutional rights under the First Amendment.

On our trips to Houston and Dallas we also see great American architecture. I am careful to explain to the students that although many of these new skyscrapers are magnificent, the recent recession in the Texas economy means that an unacceptably high level of office space in these buildings is vacant. Then I explain a little about the free enterprise system--one with high rewards but no guarantees.

A better explanation is furnished at the World Trade Center in Dallas, a showcase for the merchandise we will see in our department stores six months from now. At "Infomart" in Dallas

we have received dazzling demonstration from such information giants as IBM and Kodak. On our visits there we are able to see the front line competitors in the high tech wars.

In Houston we see the great inland port with all its refineries and giant ships, 50 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico. Traveling south we reach the Johnson Space Center and the students have an opportunity to see Mission Control. This is the United State they've heard about-capable and daring in its goals. I am proud to show them these sights. While in Houston we also visit the Astroworld amusement park, and all the pilots test their bravery anew on fast and frightening roller coasters. Across I-610 we visit the Astrodome where we have attended baseball and football games. Explaining the rules of the games is often difficult, but football comes a little more naturally to our trainees. Baseball loses many of them completely.

Some of the best times we've had, though, have been far from the big cities. For a real taste of Texas, we regularly visit a dude ranch in Bandera. There we ride horses, ride the hayrack, and eat authentic barbecue while singers encourage us to join them in a chorus of "Home on the Range." We've also rode innertubes down the Guadalupe and Medina Rivers, sampled snake meat chile at the Texas Chilimpiad Championships, bought crates of strawberries at the Poteet Strawberry Festival, and listened to dozens of ethnic music samples from blues to country to polka at the Texas Folklife Festival. And in San Antonio, our Fiesta celebration is surpassed only by the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. It is a rich offering, and one few Americans could sample in such a short time.

The highlight of our Information Program is our trip to the nation's capital. We pack a tremendous amount of sight seeing into the four days we have to visit Washington. Every single student we've taken has come away impressed.

On our first trip to Washington we met with our Congressman, U.S. Representative Henry B. Gonzalez. Congressman Gonzalez has represented his district in San Antonio for the last 26 years and has been so popular with his constituents that no one has challenged him for the past several elections. Each time we've visited him he has taken time away from his busy schedule to meet with our students and give them a fascinating view of the life of a Congressman. He's taken us to the floor of the House of Representatives, treated us to dessert in the House Dining Room, and told us what a privilege it is to work with such a grand design as the United States Constitution. Never has be spent less than three hours with us.

We've also sat spellbound at a performance of the United States Marine Corps Band and Drum and Bugle Corps at the Marine Barracks. Every American should be so lucky. The various museums and monuments we've seen on our trips leave an indelible mark. Additionally, seeing all the federal departments gives students a much better idea of why we are as we are. The concept of America is much more fully understood after seeing Washington.

If you stay in the job for long, the sights and sounds tend to be repetitious. You've been to the same buildings and heard the same explanation so often that if something seems out of place you want to correct the briefer. The idea of course, is to expose the students to the information, not to test your expertise. Along the line, you learn more about life in the United States and become more accomplished in explaining points of interest.

From discussions with other IMSOs, I know I am not unique in experiencing the pleasure of sitting down to a plate of *mensa* with Jordanian officers. I feel the warmth when, at the end of the meal, our feeding hands meet to shake in friendship. I felt the kindness and love in the sewn banners presented to our office from graduating pilots from Thailand. I been kissed on both cheeks and hugged at 6:30 in the morning by a departing officer from Turkey. I've waited all night in a hospital with a Senegalese family whose daughter had been injured in an accident and rejoiced with them when she was removed from the critical list. From the hundreds of other similar memories I've

taken from this job I've come away with a satisfaction unsurpassed in my Air Force career. I know I've done my best, and I know that, in my own way, I helped further the cause of peace through my interaction with the students I've served. Nothing can top that feeling of accomplishment. The best part of the job is the knowledge that through professionalism and caring you, as an IMSO, can make a difference in this world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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